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ELECTORAL REFORM AND DEMOCRACY
What Citizen Competence Is Assumed in the Electoral Reform Debate in Japan?

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Abstract: Whether to reform the electoral system and which electoral system to be adopted has been a longstanding controversial issue in Japan, the same as many other democracies. Nowadays the electoral reform debate in Japan is much more vigorous; taking into account the effects of each electoral system on representation, party systems, government formation and so on, different actors are insisting on different electoral systems. This paper focuses on an aspect of the electoral system which is receiving little attention in the debate: the relationship between electoral systems and citizen competence. To put it another way, a close look at the following question is needed in electoral reform debate: what citizens are like and should be like in each electoral system? First, given distinct effects of each electoral system on citizen competence, it follows that to argue for a particular electoral system is to allow a particular type of citizens to participate in the political process. Second, if a particular electoral system is to be adopted, a particular normative idea about citizens should be accepted, because each electoral system is regarded as consonant with a distinct normative idea about citizens. Through tackling the question of what citizen competence is assumed in the electoral system debate in Japan, this paper suggests that the perspective of citizen development is indispensable to the debate.

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1. Introduction

The electoral system is a critical institution to representative democracy. Its key role is described as “the cogs that keep the wheels of democracy properly functioning” (Farrel 2001: 2). Representation in the policy process, party systems, government formation, and strength and stability of a government depend to a large degree on which electoral system is adopted. The design of the electoral system, moreover, significantly influences which candidates are more likely to be elected and which parties can more easily get more seats in a legislature.

Given the importance of the electoral system in democracy, whether to reform the electoral system and which electoral system to be adopted has been a longstanding controversial issue in most democracies. Different actors involved in the electoral reform debate stress different effects of the electoral system: some deal with the trade-off between representation and strength/stability of a government (Shepsle 1988) and design an electoral system suitable to each democracy; others strategically engage in the debate and support particular electoral systems under which they are more likely to gain many benefits (e.g., to win an election).

In Japan, the same as many other democracies, there has been ongoing debate on the electoral system, whereas nowadays the debate is much more vigorous. Let us briefly overview the current debate on the electoral reform in Japan.

Since the 1994 electoral reform, Japan has adopted a mixed system in the Diet’s Lower House (House of Representatives) which combines a single-member electoral district (SMD) system and a proportional representation (PR) system; almost three fifths of the House members are elected under an SMD system whereas the other members are under a PR system.

One of the recent events enhancing the salience of the electoral reform issue in Japan is the 2011 Supreme Court decision: the Supreme Court pointed out the malapportionment in the House of Representatives and said that the electoral system was unconstitutional. This decision has led to the surge of interest in the electoral reform. In 2013, aiming at correcting the malapportionment, five SMD seats were cut, accompanied by the rezoning.

This electoral reform has been nationally seen as just a small step toward fundamental electoral reform. Such a strong public call for a drastic change in the electoral system has directed every party’s attention to the electoral reform issue. Different parties propose different reform plans; they differ mainly in whether to reduce the number of seats, how many seats to cut if reduced, and which system (SMD or PR)

to put more weight on. The ruling coalition parties and some opposition parties are in agreement that the existing mixed system will remain basically unchanged for a while (namely, the first step should be to implement incremental change in the existing system), and that the number of seats in the House of Representatives should be reduced, though they have not reached agreement about how many seats to cut or what balance to be established between an SMD system and a PR system.¹ Other parties are insisting on a drastic reform and propose an electoral system based exclusively or mainly on a PR system whereas they oppose the reduction of the number of seats.

Despite such heated debate on the electoral reform, however, little attention is being paid to a critical aspect of the electoral system: the relationship between electoral systems and citizen competence. Any electoral system does not necessarily serve as a key “cog” in democracy. One condition for this is citizen competence: citizens should be capable of evaluate legislators’ and parties’ performance (Grönlund and Milner 2006). Attending to the relationship between electoral systems and citizen competence, on the one hand, how sophisticated citizens in fact are depends on an electoral system adopted. Each electoral system has distinct effects on citizen competence. On the other hand, any electoral system has its own specific expectation on citizens. How realistic such an expectation would be significantly influences the functioning of the system. A close look at the following question, hence, is needed in electoral reform debate: what citizens are like and should be like in each electoral system.

Through tackling this question, this paper illuminates the citizen competence implicitly assumed in the current debate on the electoral reform of the House of Representatives.² Specifically, focusing on two controversial issues in the debate in Japan – whether to reduce the number of seats in the House of Representatives and how to change the SMD and PR mix (the number of each system seats) – this paper contends that the support for a particular electoral system entails allowing a particular type of citizens to participate in the political process, on the one hand, and accepting a particular normative idea about citizens, on the other.

This paper proceeds as follows. The second section marshals arguments on the

¹ Those agreements about the electoral reform in the House of Representatives are confirmed in written documents such as the agreement signed by the ruling coalition parties on March 28, 2013, the confirmation signed by the ruling coalition parties and an opposition party on November 22, 2013, and the document issued by some opposition parties on February 7, 2014.

² In addition to the House of Representatives, the electoral reform in the Upper House (House of Councillors) also has been controversial. Although this paper attends only to the electoral reform debate in the House of Representatives, the findings in this paper help examine the debate in the House of Councillors.

effects of electoral systems on citizen competence and demonstrates what citizens are like in each electoral system. The third section takes a deep look at what competence is needed for citizens to evaluate candidates and/or parties in each electoral system; to put it another way, it is revealed that each electoral system is consonant with a particular normative idea about what citizens should be like. Through the analysis in these two sections, what implications the current electoral reform debate in Japan has for citizen competence is examined. Given the gap between what citizens are like (viz., the empirical tendency of citizens) and what citizens should be like (viz., the normative expectation on citizens) in each electoral system, this paper concludes by suggesting that the perspective of citizen development is indispensable to the electoral reform debate.

2. What Effects Do Electoral Systems Have on Citizen Competence?

ELECTORAL SYSTEMS, POLITICAL INFORMATION, AND CITIZEN COMPETENCE

Electoral systems and citizen competence are not uncorrelated. How a particular electoral system functions is determined to a considerable degree by what competence citizens have; each electoral system, on the other hand, has distinct impacts on citizen competence. This section looks into the latter relationship between electoral systems and citizen competence whereas the former relationship is analyzed in the next section.

Gordon and Segura (1997), focusing on the willingness of citizens to accumulate accurate political information, reveal that PR systems are more likely than SMD systems to help citizens be more sophisticated in at least two ways. First, their analysis attends to nationally competitive elections. To win a nationally competitive election, each party makes an effort to mobilize on a national basis and to provide citizens with a lot of clear information on its distinct attitudes toward critical policy issues. Such party competition in nationally competitive elections enhances the availability of political information so that citizens have incentives to collect and utilize political information. This competitive situation is more likely to be created in PR systems than SMD systems.³ Second, disproportion between votes and seats matters.

³ SMD systems are less likely to lead parties to compete on a national basis, Gordon and Segura (1997: 131) aver, because “single member districts are often set up so that one party or another strategically withdraws from many districts.” The difference in political information offered between PR systems and SMD systems, moreover, is pointed out in other studies (e.g., Lancaster 1986; Carey and Shugart 1995). SMD systems force candidates to be more concerned with their personal reputations rather

Electoral systems such as SMD systems where the disproportion easily occurs, Gordon and Segura demonstrate, create disincentives for citizens to attend to political information. Due to these two institutional characteristics, thus, PR systems encourage citizens to accumulate information on party ideologies and policy issues; through utilizing such information, citizens are likely to be more sophisticated.

Since this thought-provoking work, various thorough analyses have been conducted regarding the proposition that PR systems have positive effects on citizen competence whereas SMD systems prevent citizens from being sophisticated. Given the aforementioned relationship between party competition and electoral systems, for instance, Drummond (2010: 712) tackles the following question: do the incentives that drive candidate-centered campaigning also strengthen the political bias citizens often exhibit when placing parties in left-right ideological space? This question, to put it another way, derives from the assumption that citizens in SMD systems have more difficulty accurately tracking parties in ideological space since those systems are more likely to lead to more personalized and less ideological politics; in PR systems with more parties, on the other hand, where much emphasis is placed on party ideologies, an ideological constraint is hypothesized to work to define the party space with greater precision. Using data on 18 advanced democracies, his analysis reveals that a kind of bias, “contrast bias,” is stronger in SMD systems. Contrast bias is defined as a bias where citizens push their less preferred parties further away.⁴

Aiming at more deeply understanding the relationship between electoral systems and citizen competence, Grönlund and Milner (2006) attend to education. Given positive impacts of PR systems on citizen competence, education attained by citizens should matter more significantly for citizen competence in SMD systems. Consistent with this hypothesis, their empirical analysis covering more than 20 countries reveals a larger impact of education attained on citizen competence in SMD systems than PR systems.

What these studies demonstrate has a crucial implication for the prevailing

than their parties’ ones; aiming at enhancing their personal reputations, they tend to pursue pork barrel projects. In PR systems, on the other hand, party ideology is more emphasized and, consequently, citizens can more easily evaluate each party’s performance.

⁴ Besides contrast bias, Drummond looks into “assimilation bias.” Assimilation bias is a bias where “voters place their preferred party closer to their own left-right position” (Drummond 2010: 712). Different from contrast bias, assimilation bias is empirically demonstrated to be strong regardless of institutional settings.

observation that turnout is higher in PR systems (e.g., Blais and Dobrzynska 1998).⁵ Factors such as the availability and clarity of political information and the degree of citizen sophistication intervene between electoral systems and participation in elections (Grönlund and Milner 2006). Electoral systems partly determine the quality of political information, on which citizen competence depends; then, the more sophisticated citizens are, the more enthusiastic they are about voting.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ELECTORAL REFORM DEBATE IN JAPAN

Given the finding that electoral systems have significant effects on citizen competence, implementing electoral reform – comparing electoral systems and choosing one system out of them – can be regarded as a complicated and far-reaching task. It requires more than just focus on factors related to legislature (e.g., representation) and government (e.g., stability and strength of government). A close look at distinct impacts of each electoral system on citizen competence also is indispensable to make an informed choice in electoral system design. Choosing a particular electoral system necessarily means that a particular type of citizens will more likely be found ubiquitously in the political process; how to evaluate such peculiar types of citizens to each electoral system, hence, is one of the fundamental question to be tackled in electoral reform debate.

Turning to the current debate on electoral reform in Japan, however, we find that scant attention is paid to effects of electoral systems on citizen competence; how sophisticated citizens will become as a result of electoral reform is left out of consideration. Given that one controversial issue in the debate is whether more weight should be placed on an SMD system or a PR system, what implications do the aforementioned studies have for this controversy?

Many parties in the Diet place more emphasis on an SMD system than a PR system; they propose that, in the House of Representatives, the number of SMD seats should be (much) larger than that of PR seats. This attitude is based on the recognition that decision making in the Diet needs to be more efficient and that the government should be more stable; the reduction in the number of parties can be seen as an effective way to achieve this goal.

The impacts of SMD systems, however, are not only positive ones (e.g., increase in the efficiency and stability in Japanese politics). Compared to PR systems, as the

⁵ As to counterarguments against this observation, vide Jackman (1987) and Ladner and Milner (1999). Blais and Aarts (2006) and Geys (2006) review and meta-analyze the literature on the relationship between electoral systems and turnout.

foregoing suggests, citizens in SMD systems tend to be less sophisticated and are unlikely to participate in voting. To place more weight on SMD systems is necessarily to allow such citizens to be dominant in the political process. If such a situation is to be avoided, then educational policy that aims at enhancing citizen competence needs to be discussed in parallel with electoral reform debate.

On the other hand, PR systems receive a lot of attention elsewhere, for instance, from a few small parties in the Diet. The arguments for PR systems focus on representation rather than efficiency and stress that various opinions including minority ones can relatively easily get seats in a legislature under PR systems. Even many of the parties that argue for SMD systems attend to this feature of PR systems (viz., increase in the representation); those parties recognize that major parties enjoy an overwhelming advantage in SMD systems, and point out the need to take some measures to respond to such a situation. One of such measures is the utilization of a PR system.⁶

Impacts of PR systems on citizen competence, however, are not being adequately discussed in the electoral reform debate in Japan. Previous studies have revealed that PR systems have positive influence on citizen sophistication: citizens in PR systems are more knowledgeable about policy issues and party ideologies and more willing to vote in elections. Such positive political effects of PR systems are undervalued in the debate.

Given that many parties in Japan agree that the existing mixed system will not be fundamentally changed soon, one may expect that negative effects of an SMD system on citizen competence could be offset by positive effects of a PR system. This expectation might be too optimistic, however, in two ways. First, when citizens cast two votes in a mixed system (one under an SMD system and the other under a PR system), they would give closer attention to candidates under an SMD system than party lists under a PR system. SMD candidates are likely to be locally based and hence closer to many citizens. Second, in the existing Japanese mixed system, the number of SMD seats is much larger than that of PR seats. This means that results of SMD elections are more critical to each party. Most parties – especially major parties – are more concerned with SMD elections, and the dynamics of electoral competition in each district gets a lot of media coverage. Citizens in the mixed system, consequently, are able to more easily gain information on candidates and tend to utilize such information even in a PR system.

As long as a mixed system – especially one in which an SMD system is more

⁶ This recognition is expressed, for instance, in the documents mentioned in fn.1.

emphasized than a PR system – is adopted, positive effects of a PR system on citizen competence will be quite limited. If citizen competence is to be regarded as essential to elections in democracy, hence, a closer look should be taken at the problem of how to enhance an individual's competence.

3. What Citizen Competence Is Assumed in an Electoral System?

IDEAS ABOUT CITIZENS

The preceding section attended to effects of electoral systems on citizen competence; in social scientific terms, the analysis regarded electoral systems and citizen competence as an independent variable and a dependent variable, respectively. The relationship between these two variables, however, is not necessarily one way. It is also reasonable to view electoral systems as a dependent variable and citizen competence as an independent variable; specifically, how democracy functions in each electoral system would be significantly influenced by how sophisticated citizens are.

If an individual are to make a careful choice in a particular electoral system, he/she needs to possess sufficient knowledge and skills to do so. Such knowledge and skills are related not only to the accumulation of political information; also crucial are knowledge and skills for utilizing political information and evaluating candidate/party platforms. In PR systems, for instance, more information on party ideologies is available for citizens, as stated above. In this case citizens are expected to, on the basis of information obtained, compare and evaluate different parties and decide which party has performed and will perform best. If citizens are not capable, the electoral system can hardly be considered to work well. Given that in different electoral systems different kinds of information are relatively available for citizens, different knowledge and skills are essential to different electoral systems. What is implied here is that arguing for a particular electoral system necessarily expects a particular type of citizens to participate; to put it another way, each system is regarded as consonant with a distinct normative idea about citizens. This means that the adoption of any electoral system requires more careful consideration regarding how realistic its expectation about citizen competence would be.

The aim of this section is to illustrate each electoral system's distinct expectation about citizen competence through linking each of the expectations with normative ideas about citizens. Before undertaking this task, it is wise to marshal normative arguments regarding citizens. What is required of citizens in democracy? There have been

numerous attempts in the study of democracy to solve this question, and various answers have been presented. The focus here is placed on just two ideas, which differ in what knowledge and skills are considered as imperative for being a citizen.⁷

The first idea is that of the “good citizen.” It makes strong demands on citizens: they should be highly concerned about public affairs, well-informed about issues and political actors, skillful enough to pursue their interests, and motivated by a desire to foster the general welfare (Dahl 1992: 46; Nie et al. 1996: 15).⁸ This concept of a citizen is rooted partly in “*citoyens actifs* (active citizens)” during the French Revolution (Matsuda 2009). Given that citizen participation necessitates sophistication, theorists such as Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès (Sieyès 1985a; 1985b, quoted in Sakagami 1992) and Jean-Denis Janjuinais (from his presentation about the draft constitution on April 29, 1793, quoted in Sugawara 2001) averred that the right of political participation be granted only to *citoyens actifs* – sophisticated individuals who have sufficient knowledge to exercise their rights and are capable of “exercising reason (*usage de la raison*).”

In the other idea about what constitutes a citizen, not every individual is required to have such expertise and intellect. Instead, emphasis is placed on the “ordinary knowledge” or “local knowledge” that individuals possess (Akiyoshi 2003; Bryant 2002). Knowledge of this kind differs from expertise created through academic and professional research activities; it consists of what an individual experiences and feels in his/her daily life.⁹ This idea can be referred to as the idea of the “adequate citizen” (Dahl 1992).

Some might say that the idea of the good citizen is too demanding; in this sense, the idea of the adequate citizen would be more reasonable. If individuals lacking in technical knowledge or skills are to be allowed to participate in the political process, however, their activities need to be supported and facilitated by some other actors so that the negative impact of such political participation could be mitigated. This supporting and facilitating role cannot be successfully undertaken by actors who have little technical knowledge and skills; good citizens are expected to play this role. Even

⁷ The description of the two ideas about citizens here relies on Matsuda (2014: 98-99). As to the detailed explanation on this categorization, vide Matsuda (2011: 104-111).

⁸ Dahl (1992) calls this view of the good citizen the classical one. He also mentions the modern view of the good citizen, which regards citizens as moved by their self-interest. If the latter view is taken, he argues, the problem of citizen competence is reduced to that of knowledge alone.

⁹ In many cases where citizen participation has been promoted today, participants are expected to provide their ordinary knowledge in the policy process (Akiyoshi 2003; Bryant 2002).

when the idea of the adequate citizen is taken up, therefore, the idea of the good citizen is still seen as crucial to political participation of citizens.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ELECTORAL REFORM DEBATE IN JAPAN

From the viewpoint of the two normative ideas about citizens, the remaining of this section examines the electoral reform debate in Japan. At the heart of the electoral reform issue, as stated above, are the questions of whether more weight should be placed on an SMD system or a PR system, and of whether the number of seats in the House of Representatives should be reduced. Thus a close look here is taken at a distinct normative idea about citizens that is explicitly or implicitly assumed in each answer to the two questions; specifically, analysis is conducted on what competence citizens are expected to have in order to process the specific kind of information more available in each electoral system.

To begin with, arguments for PR systems cannot but imply the idea of the good citizen. Under PR systems, as the foregoing illustrated, information available for citizens is likely to concern party ideologies, and citizens are likely to have incentive to accumulate such information. If citizens are to utilize such information when voting, however, more is required of them than the accumulation of information; they need to be able, for instance, to understand what problem their society is facing, compare party platforms and decide which party will be able to successfully solve the problem. Such capability is viewed as the very feature of the good citizen.

The competence characteristic of the good citizen is not one that citizens will acquire solely through experiencing elections under PR systems, namely, through “situated learning.” “Situated learning” is defined as learning that takes place in the course of an activity whereas “non-situated learning” aims only at learning (Lave and Wenger 1991). Given that learning itself is seen as self-centered (Aso and Hori 1997), critical to the acquisition of knowledge and skills essential to the good citizen is education that facilitates non-situated learning, such as classroom education.¹⁰ In electoral reform debate in which how to use PR systems is at issue, hence, close attention needs to be paid also to education policy and/or others that contribute to citizens being the good ones.

¹⁰ Education of this kind can be referred to as “citizenship education” since the aims of citizenship education include providing learners with knowledge and skills indispensable to political activities in democracy (Matsuda 2009). Matsuda (2013) stresses the need to consider citizenship education from the perspective of non-situated learning.

The reduction of the number of PR seats would not matter much for citizen competence expected in PR systems. Each candidate in constituency systems tends to take into consideration various conditions peculiar to his/her district and present his/her own ideas on policy issues, whereas party ideologies and party platforms, which are crucial pieces of information under PR systems, do not differ according to locality. What is implied here is that citizens are expected to possess the same kind of competence regardless of areas they live in.

On the other hand, critical citizen competence under SMD systems is different from that under PR systems. Information more available in SMD systems, as stated above, is likely to be personalized. It is not too demanding, as implied in Schumpeter (1947), to utilize information of this kind and choose the best partner (viz., representative). The normative assumption about citizens in arguments for SMD systems, in this sense, is closer to the idea of the adequate citizen. Citizens are expected to have minimum, not necessarily so technical, knowledge and skills regarding public affairs and to express their ordinary knowledge through voting in elections.

If citizens are to be considered as the adequate citizen, the foregoing suggests that someone should help those citizens participate in the political process. In SMD systems this supporting and facilitating role can be undertaken by legislators. Through close interaction between elected representatives and their electorates, both of them could know much about each other; representatives listen to their electorates' feelings and explain to them about the current social, economic and political situations whereas electorates evaluate such performances by their representatives.

It would be difficult to build this relationship between legislators and citizens under SMD systems, however, if the number of SMD seats in the House of Representatives is reduced. This reform leads to reducing the number of districts and thus increasing the number of citizens each legislator represent; he/she will have difficulty, consequently, closely interacting with a larger number of citizens.

A more fundamental problem related to building such relationship under SMD systems is whether legislators are able to play the supporting and facilitating role and, relatedly, whether citizens are capable of being a good judge of legislators. It is suggested here that the recruitment of candidates and the development of citizens' capability of utilizing personalized information should matter under SMD systems.

In the current debate on electoral reform in Japan, to sum up, much attention has been paid to representation, government strength and stability, and efficiency. Additionally, however, a deep look at normative ideas about citizens is also indispensable to discuss the electoral reform issue. Whether each electoral system

works as expected relies to a considerable degree on whether the distinct type of citizens expected in the system would actually exist. As long as the existence of such citizens cannot be taken as granted, citizen development should be a critical issue in the electoral reform debate.

4. Concluding Remarks

The electoral reform issue has been a longstanding controversial one in Japan. As for the existing electoral system of the House of Representatives (viz., a mixed system combining an SMD system and a PR system), opinion is divided over at least the following two questions: the questions of whether more weight should be placed on an SMD system or a PR system, and of whether the number of seats should be reduced. Various answers to these questions have been presented whereas most of the answers have agreed that representation, government strength and stability, and efficiency should be regarded as the most crucial criteria for electoral system design.

This paper has strongly set forth the idea that electoral system design should entail taking into account the relationship between electoral systems and citizen competence, which is receiving little attention in the current electoral reform debate in Japan. Specifically, it has been contended that in electoral reform debate a close look should be taken at the following question: what citizens are like and should be like in each electoral system? First, this paper has pointed out distinct effects of each electoral systems on citizen competence; it follows that to argue for a particular electoral system is to allow a particular type of citizens to participate in the political process. Second, it has been demonstrated that if a particular electoral system is to be adopted, a particular normative idea about citizens should be accepted; it is because each electoral system is regarded as consonant with a distinct normative idea about citizens. The answer to what citizens are like and should be like, in short, varies by which electoral system we have in mind. For this very reason, the relationship between electoral systems and citizen competence deserves closer attention in the electoral reform debate.

This paper has illuminated, moreover, the gap between the empirical tendency and the normative expectation about citizen competence in each electoral system. It naturally follows that deep consideration is indispensable in the electoral reform debate regarding how to narrow this gap. Since competence is “neither naturally given nor durable once achieved” (Offe 1997: 81), we have to focus not only on the electoral

system itself.¹¹ Further insight is also needed into the problem of what competence is required of a “citizen” in democracy and how to enhance an individual’s competence and to help him/her develop into a “citizen”: namely, the problem concerning citizen development.

¹¹ The analysis presented in Gastil (2000) is considered as worthy of note. He takes into consideration what citizens are like. Aiming at improving representative democracy, moreover, he explores the designs of institutional configurations through referring not only to electoral systems but also to other institutions (e.g., citizen panel). His analysis, however, does not compare various electoral systems (Beckfield 2002) or thoroughly scrutinize the problem of what citizens should be like.

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